



## 'Everything Changed'

### Ukrainian Families Describe Their Journey To Rockbridge

By HOPE HUGER

"[The] stuff we've had to experience is tremendous fear. You are unable to cry. You are unable to move. You know that you're standing, and you know that you're standing on your feet. Your hands are trembling. You cannot figure out what needs to be done and how to process everything. It's a fear that cuts you, cuts you deep," Rymma Odemchuk said in her native Ukrainian dialect.

Two Ukrainian families have been embraced by the community as they sought safety from a war ravaging their country.

Rymma and Volodymyr Odemchuk with their three children and Olha and Andrii Strezhyboroda with their two children have been welcomed this fall by Hosting Ukrainian Families.

This initiative was organized by Jerry Nay and Alexandra Brown in April 2022 shortly after the war broke out. The group, said Nay, has done a wonderful job assisting the families from "welcoming, to housing, to employment, to health, to social services, to family finances, to transportation, to shopping, to language assistance, to school enrollments, to tutoring, to extracurricular activities, all under the loving guidance of two sponsor circles, one circle for each family."

The Odemchuk family arrived in the Rockbridge area in August; the Strezhyboroda



MEMBERS of the two families brought to Lexington by Hosting Ukrainian Families, the Strezhyborodas (wearing the black shirts) and the Odemchuks (wearing the white shirts), gather in their Lexington home. (Hope Huger photo)

family came to the area last month. Both sets of parents were interviewed last week with the translation help from area resident Lisa Wilhelm, a Ukrainian native who has lived in the U.S. since 1998.

The families professed their deep gratification for how much Hosting Ukrainian Families has helped them during their acclimation to the United States.

"If we didn't have people from Hosting Ukrainian Families, we would have many obstacles, but it makes it easier to have someone to go to," Andrii Strezhyboroda commented.

Rymma Odemchuk and Olha Strezhyboroda are also grateful to be going through this journey together as they are sisters. However, they have left many more family members and friends in

See Ukrainians, page 4



VOLODYMYR and Rymma Odemchuk's three children sit on a makeshift bed in the basement of their Ukrainian home as war rages outside earlier this year. (picture provided by Rymma Odemchuk)

# Ukrainians

*continued from page 1*  
Ukraine to whom they constantly keep in contact.

As Russian forces deployed missiles that caused vast destruction within the past two weeks, the families spent a sleepless night of constant phone calls with their loved ones overseas, Rymma Odemchuk commented.

Having to leave their lives behind was difficult. Andrii Strezhyboroda said, "One of the hardest things to experience [was] to realize when it was time to leave."

As the war was progressing, the Odemchuks and the Strezhyborodas were left with no choice but to evacuate.

Before the war, they lived fairly well, Volodymyr Odemchuk said, but "as the war, began everything dramatically changed."

The Odemchuks lived close to the country of Belarus, which borders Ukraine to the north.

One night as Rymma and the three children were eating dinner at their home, a missile hit a nearby military base about 300 meters away. Rymma immediately rushed to the basement with the children, Volodymyr Odemchuk said.

Volodymyr Odemchuk was in Kyiv when the war broke out. He fled the city and welcomed other fleeing citizens back to the safety of his home. As he was fleeing Kyiv, Volodymyr recalls driving by a military base approximately two kilometers away as a missile crashed into it. "It was very chaotic trying to flee," he said.

Rymma and Volodymyr Odemchuk were worried about how their children would be psychologically impacted by the elevated emotions they experienced. For coping purposes, the couple was constantly reassuring their children, saying, "Please don't worry. Everything is safe and nothing is going to happen. They are only trying to aim at military personnel and civilians are not going to be affected."

As explosions could be heard from outside, the Odemchuks sent their three children to the basement to avoid seeing tragedy. Rymma remembers the destruction, fire and smoke, police and medical staff filling the streets outside. "We were trying to protect [the kids] from all the commotion," she said.

During the first month of the war, the Odemchuks were constantly running down to the basement as chaos erupted outside. They carried mattresses down to the basement to use as make-

shift beds and they put bags of sand near the windows as protection against exploding glass. The first few nights in the basement, the family hardly slept, only managing one or two hours of shut-eye when they could. At night, they would turn off all the lights to stay inconspicuous, particularly from Russian drones flying overhead.

One day shortly after they had noticed a few drones, an oil facility was hit by a missile, causing a tremendous explosion. The Odemchuks understood the drones weren't flying without cause, so they tried to stay in the safety of their home.

The Odemchuks remained at their home for six months until leaving for America.

Andrii and Olha Strezhyboroda lived in Kyiv. The roads around them would be used as Russian military routes as Russian forces closed in on the country's capital during the early days of the war.

Olha explained that as the war broke out, with each wail of the siren indicating an attack was underway, the family had to race down from their third-floor apartment to a filthy, crowded basement. The couple kept a getaway bag packed with the bare necessities – important documents, a blanket for the children, etc. – in the case they couldn't go back to their home or needed to flee quickly.

Much like every other parent in Ukraine, Olha and Andrii Strezhyboroda slept with their children every night.

"Everybody was sleeping with their children close to their heart," Rymma Odemchuk added.

Like all children, the Strezhyboroda children were drastically affected by what they were witnessing. Olha explained that her daughter would not eat for three days when Russians first moved into parts of the city. The Russians would eventually be pushed away from the city as the war dragged on.

For many Ukrainians, home couldn't be considered safe. Andrii Strezhyboroda was serving as a volunteer driver, shuttling resources across the country to people in dire need. He recalled Russian tanks destroying everything in their way as they drove down the streets. Andrii asked homeowners how they managed to make it out of their homes alive while the tanks used their houses for target practice; they explained how they laid as flat as possible, and after the tanks left, they escaped through the fire of their burning homes.

From his journeys as a volunteer driver, Andrii Strezhyboroda had extensive footage of the destruction throughout Ukraine. Even in the sparsely populated countryside, he saw burned vehicles, crumbling buildings, and displaced citizens.

The Strezhyborodas left Ukraine in the early phase of the war because of their proximity to the front lines. Olha and her two children headed for Germany, knowing Andrii would be following them after he finished volunteering.

Even though they no longer faced imminent danger while in Germany, the Strezhyborodas still met a number of challenges.

During the day, the children attended school with many of their classmates being from Russia. "The children felt enormous pressure and they were picked at for being from Ukraine and fleeing. They would come home and cry because the kids were being so mean," Olha said.

During the night, the children would be awakened by night terrors that haunted them even two weeks after relocating to Germany.

"Now that we're here [in Rockbridge County]," Olha Strezhyboroda said, "the feeling is completely different. The amount of support we and our children feel, and the care of the teachers and from everyone in the community is enormous. It's a great change."

Both couples feel like they were accepted into one big family when they finally reached Lexington.

Since they've been here, members of the community have introduced the families to Natural Bridge State Park, local parks, the Friends of Rockbridge Swimming community pool, and nearby fishing destinations, Volodymyr Odemchuk said.

Hosting Ukrainian Families has also helped the families file legal and employment documents, and school registration forms.

"We are so grateful for everyone we have met so far. Everybody is offering to help and do everything for us as we are new to this place," Rymma Odemchuk said. "We feel like we are a part of a family. It is so much easier for our soul to have [this] experience."

Although the families have adjusted to Lexington and the United States, there are constant reminders of the trauma they have experienced. The children show signs of PTSD as they occasionally wake up in a panic after hearing the clamor of a loud garbage truck or helicopters flying overhead. They've also dealt with some difficulty with the language barrier, but they know this will get better with time.

The Odemchuks and the Strezhyborodas look forward to the day they can return to Ukraine.

"Of course, we would love to see Ukraine in a normal, peaceful way of life," Rymma Odemchuk said.

However, with the amount of destruction Ukraine has undergone, both couples recognize the amount of regrouping and rebuilding the country will have to undergo to return to normalcy. "At this point, we don't even know what to think or plan," she said.

Volodymyr Odemchuk received a video from a family member showing the recent bombings in Kyiv. He said, "Pray for one another, because we need all the support we can get."

Anyone interested in supporting or donating to the efforts of Hosting Ukrainian Families can visit the organization's website, <https://hostingukrainianfamilies.org>.